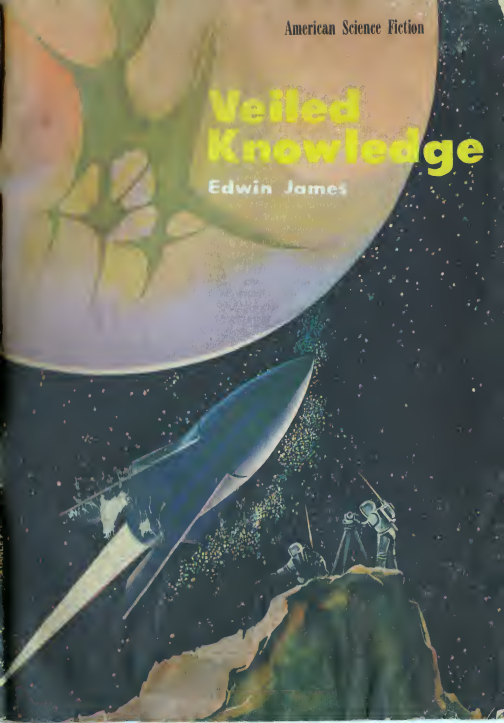


American Science Fiction

Veiled Knowledge

Edwin James





VEILED KNOWLEDGE

By EDWIN JAMES

THE drunk was in his mellow stage. He was muttering happily to himself. Sean leaned a little closer.

"The sun was shining on the sea:
Shining with all his might."

Sean's smile was a little rueful. It was nice that someone was happy. The drunk was a short, pudgy man dressed in a light spring suit. He was leaning over the railing of the pier, watching the waves roll in.

"He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright."

The drunk's attire and activities would not have been particularly noteworthy had it not been for two otherwise ordinary facts: it was midnight in New York, midnight of February 16.

"And that was odd because it was—

The middle of the night."

The drunk finished his quotation with a chortle. He turned to Sean. "Have a drink," he said, offering a fifth of bourbon very gravely.

As gravely Sean took it. He rolled the drink around his mouth and let it slide gently down his throat. He felt better. It was good hourhoun.

"Somebody once told me," the drunk said with a studied seriousness, "that nothing is impossible. Is that right?"

Sean allowed himself to be drawn into conversation. "Given enough time anything can happen," he said, "and usually does."

"Just like the monkey and the typewriter," the drunk added ponderously. "It's all a matter of probabilities."

Sean cast a quick glance at the blazing disc overhead. Probabilities or fantasy? Sean wasn't sure he wouldn't wake up soon.

"I have a wonderful idea," the drunk said happily. His voice sank to a confidential tone and he glanced suspiciously around the pier. "Let's organize a company. We'll call it 'Possibilities Unlimited.' We'll make millions."

"Hm-m-m," Sean said. "We'd need a slogan. What about 'We Do Anything'?"

"Fine, fine," the drunk exclaimed.

"Or 'Want Something?— There's No Time Like Infinity'."

The drunk tilted the bottle back and swallowed noisily. "Wunnerful! Wunnerful!" he sputtered.

Sean smiled wryly and arched his cigarette into the sea. Infinity wasn't available. There was only now. And now there was trouble. The fantastic had only too ordinary consequences; it was going to be hard to live with.

No—there was Ed and the Globe. Life as usual in spite of the fantastic. If possible. And he had dallied too long.

The drunk sidled up to him. "There might be something done about that thing," he said, jerking his thumb upward.

Sean glanced up again. "What?" he said.

The purring of a motor sounded behind them. Sean half turned and saw a long, dark car which had driven up to the head of the pier. A white blur of a face was visible at one of the windows.

"Ah, here you are, Willie," someone said from the car. "We thought we'd never find you."

So the drunk's name was Willie. Sean glanced at him. The drunk was shaking. His eyes were frightened—Sean had never seen such frightened eyes, even those of prisoners of war who knew they were going to die.

"Come along, Willie," the voice said. "And bring your friend with you."

The drunk turned to Sean and gasped out one word. "Peterson."

Then he had slipped over the rail into the water. Sean stared down in amazement. The man had sunk like a stone. Sean started to dive after him. As his feet left the pier something whispered and plucked at his coat tail. A moment later something twisted his foot.

Then he was in the water going deeper and deeper. There was nothing. The pudgy man was gone. Sean came up for air under the shadow of the pier. He raised his foot and

fingered his shoe. The heel was gone, wrenched off. He felt his coat tail. There was a neat little hole in it.

Sean suddenly felt cold. Someone had shot at him. Someone had wanted to kill him. Why?

He swam deeper into the shadow of the pier.

SEAN stared up at the big sign across the front of the towering building. The New York Globe, it said. Always first with the most.

What did Ed want? Sean O'Shaughnessy had been there first with the most once too often.

Somewhere, distantly, a woman screamed and a man shouted. Sean threw himself forward instinctively. He was halfway through the revolving door when there was an impact behind him, a tortured screech of metal, a whine of tires, and an accelerated motor. Then there was quiet.

Slowly, cautiously, Sean went back through the door to the outside. A crowd was gathering. Some of them were staring at black marks on the sidewalks or paint on the building and some were gazing down the street.

"That driver must have been drunk," some woman said indignantly.

Sean walked over to the paint mark on the building. It was dark, almost black. He turned quickly and went back inside.

The newsroom was crowded, as it was after every local catastrophe. Even in the midst of death and destruction, the American newspaper reader wanted to know how everybody else was suffering. Only this wasn't death and destruction—yet.

The reporters, pounding away at their typewriters, turned to shout greetings at Sean as he threaded his way down the aisle.

"Hey, boy! Come back to get a lock of the old man's hair?"

"You're too late. He just tore out the last one."

"Hey, Sean! Ed finally admit he couldn't run the paper without you?"

"He's been going mad ever since you left."

"Hey, Sec-an! A touch of sun-stroke?"

"It's pronounced Shawn, you Irish bum," said Sean. "Casey—you're a disgrace to the auld sod."

But he patted the red curls that framed the lovely Irish face.

"Your hand's trembling," she said in surprise.

He raised it and eyed it as if it were some strange specimen. "Why so it is!"

He moved between the rows of clattering teletypes and stopped before the door of the glass-enclosed office. The sign on the door said Edwin Stanton — Managing Editor, and beyond that was Ed's shining head bent over a desk cluttered with papers. Sean opened the door and Ed's face came up at the sound of the newsroom.

"Come in, Sean," he said. "And close that door."

SEAN shut the door behind him and took a chair in front of the desk. Ed fiddled nervously with a letter opener, but Sean sat quietly, not saying anything. He wasn't going to make it any easier. Finally Ed cleared his throat.

"We need you, Sean," he said quickly. "We need every good newspaperman. This is a crisis and the newspapers are going to have to bear a lot of the weight of it. We want you to come back."

"What about Morris?" asked Sean, gently.

"Morris be hanged," Ed said irritably. "This is bigger than Morris, more important even than the Globe."

Sean whistled softly. Always before it had been the Globe first and the rest of the world second.

"I know—I know," Ed snapped. "Anyway, Morris is going to be too busy to worry about Columnist Sean O'Shaughnessy and whether the Globe has fired him" as requested.

"He's got a lot of money," Sean said.

"Rub it in," Ed sighed. "Also it's mostly tied up in coal. He'll have lots to think about; people aren't going to want much coal this winter."

"Nor next summer."

Ed gave him a shrewd glance. "No," he said. "They won't. They won't want much of anything. Except maybe a hunk of the North Pole. That's what I mean—we're going to need you."

Sean sighed. "A lot of things have happened to me today, Ed. I get fired; I see the sun go down and come up again in the East a few minutes later. I see a drunk drown himself; somebody takes a couple of shots at me; I almost get run over. And now you want me to come back to work."

"Well?" Ed asked.

"For one, brief, delirious moment I thought I was out of this business."

Ed relaxed. "All right, listen. About 6 p.m., our time, the moon was overhead in England, and observers saw what appeared to be a bright flash behind the moon. That faded. At 6.01 the moon appeared to grow a halo. This got brighter until, at 6.02, a rim of fire appeared around the edge. At 6.03—?"

He pointed out the window at the flaming disc that had been the moon. "It's pouring out enough heat to raise the temperature in New York 40 degrees in a few hours."

Sean began to whistle a tune. It was It's June in January. Ed's face got red. "It's not funny."

"I know," Sean said, breaking off. "Wait till the sun and moon come up together. Wait till summer."

"That's why I telephoned you to come back," Ed said somberly.

"What am I supposed to do," Sean said, "organize a bucket brigade?"

"There'll be better men than you or I trying to do that," Ed began slowly. "Right now this is a novelty—and a rather pleasant one. You walk into your house and it's winter, below freezing. You walk out and it's a balmy spring. But what we're worried about is the people when they find out the real consequences."

"Who's we?" Sean asked, his eyes narrowing.

"An hour ago I had a call from Washington. All disseminators of public information are being organized. Nothing gets out that isn't in the public interest?"

"And who decides that?"

"We do—following the lines laid down in Washington. They'll be too busy with other things."

"I imagine," Sean said drily. "What is their decision on what is fit to print?"

"We can't tell the public everything at once. If they knew all the possible consequences, there would be

riots and a total collapse of morality and government. They must be conditioned to the idea slowly. No alarming statements or predictions; reassurances, if necessary, and slow and subtle but steady information on the conditions they will have to face."

"I see," Sean said. "And that's my job, I presume."

"I'm assigning you to features," Ed said. "Anything connected with the moon and its new condition. Keep enough news flowing to satisfy the demand but not enough to alarm. Keep it light, if you can, but slip in a fact here and there. Nothing scary."

"In other words," said Sean, "do a propaganda job on the moon. Make the public think it's as good, if not better, than the old one."

"That's right," Ed said. "But it's not for profit this time. It's for survival."

"I know," Sean said, and he stared out the window at the white-hot disc of the moon. His face was strained and pale, and his voice was low. "Don't count on me too much, Ed. I'm scared."

THE teletypes were pounding away madly, threatening to shake themselves from their foundations. Sean watched them for a few minutes, scanning the information that streamed from the machines. Then he ripped off a few items, walked to his desk, and lit a cigarette.

He arranged the sheets of yellow paper in a neat pile and read them through carefully. They were comprehensive. And most of the information was confidential.

How to tell it was the problem. How to tell enough but not too much. How to explain it satisfactorily without telling the truth. Sean took out several sheets of copy paper and began to write down the essential facts. He had to have them all in hand before he could fabricate successfully.

An atomic explosion on the hidden side of the moon set up a chain reaction which converted the entire mass of the moon into a gaseous, burning sphere of exploding atoms much like the sun. The heat given off by the moon is much less than that of the sun but that is partially counterbalanced by its nearness.

So much for the facts that were known. The rest was conjecture, but it was guesswork by men who were qualified to guess.

It was a natural occurrence. It was started by the bringing together of a large quantity of fissionable material, of which there is practically none refined by nature. Whether it was deliberate or not is another matter.

There were three explanations offered:

The explosion was set off by: (1) inhabitants of the hidden side of the moon—an accident; (2) an earth nation which had mastered space flight; either deliberately, by rocket, or accidentally, through the explosion of an atomic factory; or (3) extra-terrestrial forces bent on destroying earth.

Of the three, Sean liked the second best. There would be only too many reasons to establish a secret colony and factory on the moon. It could not be deliberate—any earth nation would be in the same boat with the rest of the world. And the other two possibilities were too far-fetched.

The effects predicted were frightening.

The temperature range in the temperate regions would be from 60 degrees in the winter to 130 in the summer. The tropics would be unbearable, and the semi-arctic would be similar to the tropics before the change.

Sean smiled grimly. There would be a big rush north.

Another aspect, allied to the climatic changes, would be the increasing frequency of high intensity storms, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. Those who live near water would have the heat tempered for them, but they would be in greater danger from inclement weather.

There were, of course, a few compensations.

Man's store of available energy was greatly increased. Practically all the energy used by man, atomic energy excluded, comes to him through the radiation of the sun. Plant life converts it into fuel, it makes the winds blow, it lifts the waters from the sea and carries them

to the mountains. The moon would intensify that action.

Those high wind and torrential rains might be energy in the raw, Sean thought wryly, but it was rather an uncomfortable method of getting it. He glanced at some of the news reports. They ranged from the tragic to comic relief.

Fifty heat deaths below the equator when the temperature zoomed to 120. It was summer there. The birds were flying north. Danger of large-scale floods with the spring thaw coming all at once. Spring crops coming up.

Maybe they would have phenomenal results if the storms didn't beat them down or they didn't wither in the heat. They would need a good crop.

Large increase in static on AM sets — generally poor reception. There weren't many AM sets left: that wouldn't bother anyone.

Some mysterious radio signals.

That would be good to take the people's minds off their troubles.

Sean stuck a sheet of copy paper in his typewriter and started beating away at his story. It was hard not to put in all the facts. He steeled himself. The reason could go in, but not the explanations. The innocuous predictions, but not the dire ones. The news items — yes, they would have to be included.

FINALLY it was finished. Sean got up wearily, collected the sheets and took them in to Ed. The managing editor looked through the story quickly. "Good enough," he said. "You've got the idea. Only, those mysterious radio signals may not be as funny as you think. Washington has a top cryptographer working on them."

Sean shrugged. Ed reached into his desk, pulled out a small card, and tossed it toward the reporter. Sean picked it up and glanced at it. He looked quickly at Ed.

"You're now an agent of the government," Ed said softly. "Remember that."

Sean frowned. "Why?"

"Every person in a responsible position has one of those now," Ed said grimly. "You may be called on to give help at any time, to quell a

riot, spike a rumor, or keep your teeth clamped shut on the truth. You'll need that card. Without it, nosy questioners or people who want to get into strange places won't be looked on kindly."

Sean nodded, and tucked the card away.

"Where will you be," Ed asked, "if I want to get in touch with you in the next hour or so?"

"For the next half hour," Sean said wryly, "at the nearest bar. After that, at the University. Professor Lyons. I need some first-hand information."

He walked into the newsroom, glanced down the row of desks, and hesitated. Finally, he shrugged and walked down the aisle. "Casey," he said. "How would you like to join me in a drink?"

She looked up quickly. "Are you trying to lead me into evil ways?"

"Nothing could be farther from my thoughts," Sean said easily.

"In that case, there's not much point in accepting," she said. She got up, standing slim and desirable beside him. "But I can always hope you'll change your mind."

CHAPTER II

SEAN glanced around warily as they left the building, but the streets were almost deserted. It was just before dawn; the bright moon had gone down. It should have been dark, but there was a sort of twilight instead.

The few people on the street looked hot and uncomfortable as they walked along. They seemed irritable, and perhaps it was not all due to the heat. Then a dark cloud began to come up quickly, and people cast quick glances at it and scurried for their destinations.

"I feel sorry for them," Pat said.

"Why them, especially?"

"I mean all of them, knowing something strange has turned their world upside-down, not knowing what it may do to them, finally. And yet they keep on with their everyday work and life, sure, fundamentally, that man will find a way to survive this crisis as he has all the rest. There's something really great about them."

"Great?" Sean questioned.

"Yes," Pat said vigorously. "For almost any one of these brave, foolish, quixotic people, if put to the final test, would sacrifice himself for the future of his family, his country, or his race. In the mass they may be swayed to terrible things, but individually they're great."

"What about us," Sean asked. "who know what the future may bring?"

She glanced at him. "We're different," she said. "We're cynical; we've been observing and reporting their doings so long that people in the mass or individually are only ciphers."

Sean laughed. "Except you, Casey. You're no cipher. Your figure is much better than that."

They dodged into the bar just ahead of the first huge splatters of rain. They were soon seated in the secluded side booth which was the favorite of the Globe's reporters.

"I'm not sure," said Sean, soberly, "that the greatest loss in the moon transformation will not be its romantic influence." A smile crossed his lips. "What will you do now, Casey, when there is no moon to sigh beneath?"

She laughed. "You're as naive as all men, O'Shaughnessy. It's you who made the moon a symbol of romance; we only used it. It's the men who sighed and dreamed, women schemed."

"That sounds very cold and calculating."

"It was," she said. "The moon was a cold, chaste, unresponsive goddess, and that's why you wanted her—and us. Oh, occasionally, I admit, we got swept away by our own propaganda—but, generally speaking, we kept our heads."

"Hm-m-m," Sean murmured. "The things you never know until too late."

"It's the women who have to keep the world running properly," Pat said. "If it were left to the men, they'd always be running off on some wild crusade or hare-brained scheme and never get down to the practical fundamentals of life, like hard work and getting married and raising children."

"Oh, I imagine we'd get around to it in time," Sean smiled.

"I doubt it," said Pat seriously. "You'd rather have the world un-

settled and adventurous. Women are the custodians of life; they have to see that everything is safe and sensible and secure, that the world is a proper place to settle down in and raise a family."

"Then I was right," said Sean, "when I said the loss of the moon's romantic influence would be the greatest tragedy, although I didn't know I was being so serious."

"Oh, it isn't so serious," Pat said lightly. "It was only a handy device. Women have a hundred other weapons in the battle for the preservation of the race. We'll think of something else; we're eternally resourceful when it comes to catching a man and making him into a husband and father."

SEAN half rose from his bench and leaned over the table. "Like this?" he said, and kissed her lightly.

Before he could draw back, Pat caught him by the shoulders. "No—like this," she said, and, placing her soft lips firmly against his, held them there for a long moment.

Sean sank back. "I see what you mean," he said, breathlessly.

They were silent. Finally Pat broke the spell. "Sean," she said, "why do you call me 'Casey'? Why don't you call me 'Pat' like everybody else?"

His smile was a little crooked. "Men have to have their defenses."

"Against me?" she smiled.

"Maybe it's because I'm afraid," Sean said.

"Of me!" she exclaimed.

"Of everything."

She laughed. "Oh, no! Not the great O'Shaughnessy, reporter-hero of a thousand floods, fires, wars, catastrophes. Afraid!"

His tone was deadly serious. "I'm a fraud," he said. "I've always been afraid. That's why I've done the things I have—to try to live down that feeling inside that keeps telling me I'm worthless. Before, it wasn't so bad; the dangers were impersonal. But now someone is trying to kill me."

"Why?" she gasped.

"I don't know," he said miserably. He didn't meet her eyes. "I wanted you to know what kind of person I am. I've run before; I may run again. And I'll end up hating myself and everybody else."

Her eyes were on his face. There was pity in them and understanding and—something else. But his gaze was still focussed on a dark corner of the bar. "We're all afraid," she said lightly.

He raised his glass and moodily took a drink. A moment later he spat it out on the floor and reached across the table to knock her glass out of her hands and away from her lips.

She was half-startled, half-angry. "Was that supposed to be funny?"

"Cyanide!" he said.

There had been no disturbances yet. The sun—the real sun, this time—had come up, leaving only a brief, cooler period between the two long stretches of day.

It would take a long time to accustom oneself to this, Sean thought, as he walked into the building from the campus, out of the heat.

A uniformed policeman stopped him. "Where you goin', buddy?" he asked, as if he knew the answer and didn't like it.

"Professor Lyons," Sean said. "Interview for the Globe."

The policeman shook his head. "No dice, buddy; come back next week."

"What's happened here?" Sean asked, alarmed. "Why are the police here?"

"No questions, buddy," the cop said sharply. "Move along."

Sean opened his mouth and shut it again. He was about to back away when he thought of the card Ed had given him. "Does this mean anything to you?"

The cop took a good look at it and grumbled. "Why 'didn't you say so?" he said sourly. "Go ahead."

SEAN walked down the hall. When he glanced back, the officer was standing implacable before another visitor. Sean turned it over in his mind a few times before he knocked at the office door.

"Come in," a voice called.

Sean opened the door and walked in. Three men were grouped around a desk at the rear of the office. One of them was Professor Lyons; the other two he didn't know.

"Ah, O'Shaughnessy," Lyons said. "I was expecting you to show up soon. I didn't think you'd let the uniform at the front door stop you."

Sean flipped his card at them. "I'm a member of the fraternity."

Lyons glanced at it and tossed it back. "O'Shaughnessy of the Globe, Professors Davis and Stewart, physics and astronomy, respectively."

They nodded their greetings.

"I'm afraid there isn't much we can tell you," Lyons said.

"I can think of a lot of things," Sean said drily; "suppose we start with what the cop is doing at the door."

They glanced at each other. "It seems the public isn't to find out the scientific explanation for the moon's peculiar state," Lyons said. "The officer is ostensibly there to keep us from being molested, but we more than half suspect that he is also posted to keep us from talking to any but authorized personnel."

"Even though we have been enlisted, as you have," said Stewart, "in the forces of the government."

"Apparently," added Lyons, with conscious irony, "scientists are not considered too trustworthy when it comes to secret information."

"That must have disrupted your classes," said Sean.

"Quite true," Lyons said. "But they would have been broken up in any case; our students have been organized into a temporary auxiliary force of police for keeping the peace."

"I see," said Sean, leaning toward them. "What I want to know is can man survive this change?"

"I'm afraid we can't answer that question, or any more questions," Davis broke in coldly. "We have been instructed to confide in no one; I intend to see that we obey those instructions."

"Professor Davis!" Lyons exclaimed. "We were told to talk to no one except authorized persons. Sean is obviously authorized. And I'm sure nothing will get through to the public that shouldn't."

"If I'm to do an efficient job of giving the public what they should have, I'll have to know the real answers," Sean said firmly.

"I intend to register my protest, nevertheless," Davis said; "I advise against it."

"The answer to your question, Sean," Lyons said, "is maybe. Not all, probably, but undoubtedly some

will continue to exist. With superhuman efforts, perhaps a majority could survive—under different conditions, of course."

"What do you mean," Sean asked quickly, "superhuman efforts and different conditions?"

"The first step would be to harness as much of the added energy as possible—by building huge windmills, increasing our hydro-electric capacity, and so forth. Then the cities would have to be protected from the elements—by going underground or being roofed."

"Of the two," put in Stewart, "we consider the roofing the more practical and desirable."

"Extensive hydroponic farms must be started," Lyons continued, "to supply food until it is seen whether our present plants can survive the changed environment and the elements or we can develop new varieties."

"Is that program possible?" Sean asked.

"Possible?—yes," said Lyons. "On a small scale, probable. But whether it can be or will be done extensively is uncertain. The final decision, of course, is up to Washington. All we can do is suggest."

"Are there any chances of doing something about the moon?"

Stewart smiled grimly.

"You might as well try to put out the sun."

SEAN suddenly noticed that their voices had been pitched well above normal for several minutes. Listening, he heard the reason. There was a strong whine and whistle in the background. He looked out the window, the others following his gaze. The trees outside were whipping wildly.

"That's the first of the big winds," Lyons said.

It was an insistent, irritating sound. No matter how far pushed into the back of the mind, it was never completely forgotten.

"So that's it, then," said Sean; "the survival of the fittest again."

"Unless we can work together far better than we have before," said Stewart, "it will mean fairly complete destruction."

"Unless—" Lyons began, and bit

"Unless what?" Sean urged.

"If Peterson's Colony could be persuaded to—"

"Professor Lyons!" Davis commanded coldly.

"But Davis!" Lyons protested nervously.

"Never!" Davis said in biting tones.

"I suppose you're right," Lyons said weakly and turned back to his desk.

An uneasy silence fell upon them, a silence threaded with the eager, ravenous whine from beyond the window. Sean glanced casually at the two men, but his mind was racing. What meaning did that scene have, if any? That was the second time he had heard the name "Peterson."

Sean was about to take his leave when the telephone rang. Stewart answered it and handed it to the reporter.

He listened for a moment and began scribbling on a piece of copy paper. Finally he put the phone down gently.

"A Navy cryptographer," Sean said slowly, "has deciphered a message apparently from outer space on a line, roughly, with the constellation Orion. This, supposedly, is what the message said:

"To the government (or governments) of earth and to its people—We, the race of Karth, from the sun of Dilor, have initiated a chain reaction on your satellite as the first step in our conquest of your planet. We have powers beyond your imaginings. If you obey us you will not be hurt and will be afforded the blessings and comforts of the Karth rule. If you do not, we will force your flaming satellite from its orbit and cause it to approach your planet until it breaks apart and showers you with its disintegrating matter. These are our instructions: all weapons, no matter how small or large will be collected and deposited at one spot, where they will be destroyed. At a time which will be set later representatives of the government (or governments) will meet with the

occupying ship to surrender the planet. If you agree to these conditions, set off a large explosion on the desert to the south of your largest inland sea when the constellation which is shaped like a square with a line across it is directly overhead. We will give you thirty revolutions of your satellite to consider this. After that it will be too late."

Lyons licked his lips nervously. "It's a joke," he said. "Someone's trying to pull a practical joke. Not a very funny one either."

"How could they decipher something like that?" Stewart objected.

"It was in Morse code," Sean said. "Slightly garbled, as if someone had picked up the snatches which had passed through the Heavyside layer and pieced out the language from that."

"It must be true," Davis said harshly; "no one on earth has the knowledge or the ability or the power to start a chain reaction on the moon. We should have known that."

"What are we going to do?" Lyons asked, helplessly.

"Give up, of course," Davis said: "we can't fight that kind of power."

"I'm afraid you're right," Sean said, getting up to leave.

Lyons walked toward him and clasped his hand firmly. "Come around any time, Sean. I imagine we'll be pretty lonely for a while. Unless they call off our bodyguard."

"I'll do that," said Sean, repressing a start of surprise.

He exchanged pleasantries with the others and walked away swiftly, not stopping until he was cut off from sight of the office by a bend in the corridor.

Then he carefully unfolded the slip of paper Lyons had pushed into his hand.

"Find out," it read, "where major inventions of 1950-60 came from! Last hope."

Sean set a match to it, watched it burn, and ground the ashes under his heel.

Outside the wind was howling.

CHAPTER III

IT was a hard pull to get the door open against the sweep of the wind. Sean ducked quickly inside the lobby and straightened his coat and hair. He stopped at the desk to look for mail. The clerk looked up as Sean saw his box was empty. "Oh, Mr. O'Shaughnessy," he said. "There was a man here looking for you."

Sean forced himself to be calm. "What did he look like?"

"Sort of tall and thin with gray hair. He wouldn't leave his name."

The description didn't fit anyone Sean knew. He nodded and started to walk away. The clerk called him back.

"He left a package for you—the man I was talking about. It wouldn't fit in your box."

The clerk hauled it out and set it down on the desk. It was a square package about five inches on a side. Sean stared at it dully.

"It has your name on it, but no return address," the clerk said.

Sean picked it up gingerly and walked to the elevator. He got off at the fifth floor and walked to his room fumbling for his key. When he was inside he placed the package on a table and looked at it.

The package was innocuous enough, wrapped in brown paper and tied with white string. But there was no reason for anyone to leave a package for him. Except—!

A cold feeling of fear welled up in him, choking him. When he lit a cigarette his hands were trembling. They were after him. Four times within less than twenty-four hours. Two bullets. A car. Poison. And now this. There was no doubt in his mind what the package was.

Why? Why did he have to die? What had he done; what had he seen; what did he know? There was the little drunk whose name was Willie who had been afraid to go on living. And Professor Lyons who was afraid, too. And one word: "Peterson." Did someone want him dead because he had heard that name? Or because he might have heard more?

They won't get me, he thought savagely. I won't sit here and be a target. Let them find me if they want me.

Panic seized him. He ran into the bathroom and filled the bathtub with water. He picked the package up, almost dropping it in his haste, and slipped it gently under the water.

SEAN went back in the bedroom and threw a few clothes into a small bag. He slipped out of the hotel the back way, glancing around carefully to make sure no one saw him. A cab was waiting at the head of the alley.

"Where to?" the cabby asked.

"Just drive around," Sean said shakily.

He watched out the back window for fifteen minutes. No one was following him. He could swear to it. But there was no use taking any chances.

Sean tossed a couple of hills onto the front seat and slipped out at a corner drugstore. He made two calls, one to the police, the other to Pennsylvania station.

He watched the street from the front of the store for several minutes. Then he stepped out and hailed another cab. "Penn station," he said.

When he entered, a tall thin man with gray hair was watching one of the doors. Sean dodged into one of the stores, hoping that he hadn't been seen. He watched the man closely. There was no doubt about it; the man was waiting for him.

How did they know, he thought in anguish. They couldn't have known. It must be a guess.

And then the tall, thin man with gray hair stepped forward to greet a middle-aged woman coming through the door.

Sean felt himself go weak inside. A moment later he cursed himself for being a fool and a coward. He stepped out of the store and walked to the reservation window.

"Here you are, sir," the clerk said "One for—"

"Thank you," Sean said loudly.

The clerk looked at him curiously. Sean walked slowly away, glancing around with apparently casual interest but scanning each face for recognition. He lounged near the stairs to the trains and lit a cigarette; he hadn't long to wait.

Sean repressed any signs of

emotion when the attendant called his train. The passengers went down, chatting, carefree. Sean envied them and didn't move. At the last moment he dashed down the stairs as the conductor called "All aboard." He swung up the steps just as the train started to move.

Standing at the entrance, watching the platform, he was breathing a sigh of relief when a short, fat man carrying a large suitcase rushed into sight and boarded the train. The fat man pushed himself past Sean, puffing, without a sign of interest and moved into the car. Sean watched him through narrowed eyes. Finally he shrugged.

But it was the short, fat man who bumped against him in the Chicago station. Sean just kept himself from going under the wheels of the train by a quick, twisting turn. When he regained his balance, the man was gone.

Sean cursed and took even greater precautions. In Kansas City he dodged through taxicabs, stores, and side streets for an hour before he arrived at the house of a friend. Even then he couldn't sleep, tossing and turning in feverish thought and tortured doubts.

The burning roof of the house collapsed just as he got out of it.

The motor of the airplane he caught at the Municipal Airport sputtered and died soon after it took off. Luckily, it was able to glide back for a dead stick landing.

Sean boarded another train. In Albuquerque he was red-eyed and shaky from loss of sleep and little food. He almost collapsed when a truck backfired on a nearby street. He crept, trembling back on to the train.

As the train rolled westward, there were no further attempts on his life. Sean sat in his compartment staring blindly out at the desert. Had they been attempts on his life? Or mere unrelated accidents? He was never to know. Had he lost them? Or were they trying to lull him into a false sense of security?

He got up, locked the door, and threw himself down on the unmade bed. In a few minutes he was asleep.

In San Francisco he bought a gun and stooped running.

FROM his hotel room, Sean put in a call to Washington, D.C. When he hung up he looked down at the list of names and addresses. It seemed very ordinary. A few of the names were familiar; most were not. The addresses? Scattered over the face of the United States.

Sean scratched his nose reflectively with the tip of his pencil. Where was the mystery?

He picked up the telephone again and asked the operator for the phone of a Mr. Joseph David Carter at an address there in San Francisco. There was a short wait and then a voice came through, thin and querulous. "Hello? Hello?" it said. The voice might have been that of a man or a woman.

"Is a Mr. Joseph David Carter there?" Sean asked.

"Who?" asked the voice, stupidly.

"Joseph David Carter," Sean repeated.

"Oh, Carter! He ain't lived here for almost ten years."

"Did he leave a forwarding address?"

An ear-splitting clap of thunder came over the wire. Sean smiled grimly. "Wait a minute," said the voice, crabbedly. "I'll see."

Sean waited for several minutes. Finally he heard the clatter of the phone being picked up again. "Just a post office box number here," the voice said. It gave the number.

"Thanks," said Sean and jiggled the hook. The operator came back on.

"Give me the main post office," Sean said.

After some trouble in getting the right person, Sean finally found an official who could help him. "Yes," said the clerk, returning, "we have a box here for Joseph Carter."

"Thanks," said Sean and started to hang up.

"If you get in touch with him, though," said the clerk, "you might tell him he has mail here."

"Doesn't he call for it?"

"There hasn't been any mail removed from the other side of that box for several years."

Sean hung up, scratched his head,

and jotted down that apparently inconsequential piece of information. He continued his search for others on the list, running up a considerable phone bill. A few of them he found at the addresses given; but the majority had vanished, leaving nothing behind but a San Francisco post office box number.

So, mused Sean, and what significance has San Francisco that the inventors of the '50s should vanish there, leaving only a box number as their forwarding address? And none of the boxes had been approached in years. Somewhere the clue to this curious behaviour was hiding, waiting to explain many things.

But the two circling, fiery globes wouldn't wait. Every hour they created more havoc. And the public was getting restless; any moment panic might break through the tight bonds of secrecy and control.

Sean took a cab to a San Francisco newspaper office. From the managing editor, an acquaintance of several years, he got the permission he needed.

SEAN quickly found his way to the morgue. The superannuated reporter who handled the files cast a nervous, questioning look toward him from under straggly, white eyebrows.

It's even getting him, Sean thought. He feels it, too—the restlessness, the tension, the working against time.

"Anything you can find on a man named Peterson," Sean said. "And any reference to a colony of that name. Twenty years or so ago, I think. Maybe more."

The old man went silently about his task, thumbing through an index, referring to the cabinets that lined the rooms. He tossed a bundle of clippings on the desk and went back to his searching.

Sean leafed through them quickly. "Must be some other Peterson," he said.

The old man grunted.

Finally he returned with another envelope, this one covered with dust. "This says 'Peterson,'" he said. "Don't know what's in it. Must have been here before I took over."

Sean began to scan the yellowed clippings inside. Gradually his read-

ing grew slower until he was absorbing every word. An hour later he looked up and put the last clipping carefully aside. During that hour the noise and voices outside had failed to penetrate his concentration. Now his eyes, strained by trying to decipher faded printing on discolored paper, refused to focus for a moment.

Finally, the old man, seated at his desk, swam into view. He was gazing at him curiously. "The way you been reading," he said, "it might be your own obit."

"No," said Sean, slowly. "Maybe just the opposite. For everybody."

Leaving careful instructions to safeguard the clippings, Sean went back to his hotel room and put in another call to Washington. While he was waiting for an answer to his question, he lay back on his bed. His eyes stared at the ceiling, unseeing. Occasionally he would get up and pace restlessly or stare impatiently at the telephone.

He was getting close.

WHEN the call finally came through, it was storming outside. Thunder cracked loudly, and hail clattered in the streets and against the windows. At times it was difficult to make out the answers of the voice on the other end of the line.

"South Pacific?" Sean said and again, "South Pacific. Location?" He scribbled on a sheet of paper. "Let's have it once more. Dimensions? Out of the shipping and air lanes? Anything more known about it?"

He thanked the voice from Washington and hung up. He sat down in a chair and concentrated on his notes. It was falling into place, all the pieces forming a pattern of hope.

Sean was rested. He felt better than he had for a long time; he was through running. He still didn't know why. He didn't know a lot of things, but he knew enough.

He put in a call to New York and got through almost immediately. "Hello, Professor Lyons?"

"Yes," said the voice at the other end of the line. It sounded tense and wary.

"Somebody else there, eh?" said Sean. "Pretend you're talking to a relative. Your Aunt Harriet or somebody."

"Oh, hello, Aunt Julie. How are you?"

"I'll ask the questions," said Sean. "You just say yes or no, right or wrong. Got it?"

"That's fine," Lyons said.

"The way I've got it figured is this," Sean said. "A geneticist named Peterson tried to get public acceptance for a scheme to improve the race by planned marriages, but he wasn't successful."

"That's good," said Lyons. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Sean took a deep breath and went on. The rest was conjecture. "So he gathered together a group of extra-intelligent people — scientists, men and women—bought an island in the South Pacific, and settled down to found a colony, the nucleus of an ideal society, hoping that it would spread later."

"That's right."

"For the first few years they needed money to buy machinery, raw materials, and that sort of thing, so they put out a lot of inventions and collected the royalties. When they became independent of outside resources, they stopped their efforts and withdrew from all contact with the outside world under a heavy veil of secrecy."

"Yes," Lyons said, "that's true. Aunt Julie."

"A lot of scientists know about it, however, but they have been sworn to secrecy. They are very much in sympathy with the experiment, feel that contact with the outside world would sully it, perhaps destroy it, and would go to great lengths to protect its secret."

"I imagine you're right."

"The colony," Sean went on, "may have made great scientific advances and may know what to do about the moon and the ultimatum from the aliens."

"Yes," Lyons said.

"But left alone they may decide to take care of themselves and let the rest of the world go, unless they are convinced that it's to their

best interests to string along with us."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Lyons. His voice sounded a little worried. "I'm rather busy, Aunt Julie; I don't think we'd better talk much longer."

"Just one more thing. Do you think it would be a good idea for someone to go there to try to make them see the light?"

"I think that would be a fine idea," Lyons said. "But don't bore anybody else with those old stories of yours. Oh, yes, I'm fine. I wouldn't worry about the moon any more; I think it's going to be all right. Good luck, Aunt Julie. Goodbye."

The phone clicked. Sean set it down gently. He looked out the window where the huge hailstones were beating down mercilessly. As he looked the window cracked under the impact.

Sean felt determined. He wasn't afraid any more—at least not in the old way. This was different. This wasn't blind and unreasoning; this was a calm awareness of the difficulties and the odds—a sensible thing. He could live with it.

He called the airport and made arrangements for a group of independent pilots to meet with him within an hour at the port. He looked at the cracked window again. There would be that to contend with, as well.

Sean went to his coat and got out the automatic. Carefully he ejected all the shells. Slowly he cleaned the gun, oiled it, worked it back and forth to see that it moved easily. He filled the clip and slipped it into the butt of the gun.

He got up and put on his coat. Picking up the gun, he placed it in a side pocket. The bulge was almost imperceptible. He put on his hat. He wouldn't need anything else.

Sean looked around the room. His face seemed harder; his eyes, too, were harder. There was a different air about him. He looked like a man it would be wise not to disagree with.

He opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

CHAPTER IV

THE pilots milled around uncertainly in the small room just off the airport. Outside, the wind blew fiercely and huge hailstones clattered on the roof and bounced off the pavement.

"Listen, mister," one of them said finally. "It isn't we're afraid, but any man's a fool to go out in weather like this."

"Of course you aren't afraid," Sean said pleasantly. "I admit I'm a fool, but I want to know if there's another fool here."

"Why can't you wait a few days, mister," said another pilot. "Maybe the storm will let up."

"Maybe it won't, too," Sean said. "I want to go out as soon as possible, and I've got the money to pay for the trip."

"No one could have that much money," muttered another.

"What are you afraid of?" Sean asked. "The only thing you have to lose is your lives."

"What about our ships?"

"I'll put up money to pay full insurance coverage on you and your ship."

"What good will that do us if we're not around to collect it?" someone piped from the back of the room.

"Let's look at facts," Sean said. "Either you men are pilots or you aren't. This weather isn't going to let up; it's with us to stay. You have to fly in it or get a job digging ditches. The money you have sunk in your planes is going to be a total loss unless you use them—no one else will want them. I'm giving you a chance to make some money to replace that loss."

"I'd rather dig ditches in the ground than the ocean," one pilot said.

"Yeah, mister," another said. "If you wanted to go some place overland, I'd say 'swell—hop aboard.' But this ocean stuff is suicide, now. Storms pop up out of nowhere, even if you can get off the ground. You might just as well run into a hurricane or typhoon as not. No, sir, not for me."

"Let me tell you this, then," Sean

began. "I'm on important business—important for all of us, important for the future of the world. I wouldn't risk my neck for anything less."

"What do you mean—important?"

"I can't tell you everything, but it has to do with the moon and its present condition. If I'm successful it may bring the moon back to normal."

"If it's so important," one of them said skeptically, "why don't you get the navy to fly you?"

"There are reasons I can't explain why that is impossible," Sean said, pulling out his billfold. "I am, however, an agent of the government."

He pulled out the card Ed had given him. One of the pilots glanced at it. "That don't mean a thing," he said. "We've all got those."

"All right," Sean said. "Is any body willing to risk it?"

The silence was sullen.

"Aren't there any men left around here?" Sean said desperately.

One of the pilots, a big man in his flight jacket, stuck his nose close to Sean's face.

"I don't take that from anybody," he said savagely.

"Why don't you do something about it?" Sean said quietly. "Like flying me where I want to go."

The man glared at him for a moment and spun on his heel. "I got a family, mister," he said. "They come first."

THE rest got up and slowly followed him. Finally the room was cleared except for Sean and an average-sized blond fellow in a shabby leather jacket. He was grinning.

"Well," Sean said bitterly, "why don't you follow your buddies?"

"Sorry, mister," he said, tossing his curly hair. "I didn't want to make the other guys feel bad; I'll take that job."

"What's the matter," Sean asked "no family?"

"Nope," he said, grinning. He got up and stretched. "All I got is me and my plane; I just like to fly."

"Amphibious?"

"Yep," he said. "Range: ten thousand miles, if we load her to the

limit. I had a service to the Islands before the storms blew up. She's a sweet ship."

"I'll pay you five thousand dollars for the trip, plus insurance for you and your ship."

"Just the ship, mister," the pilot grinned. "I don't want anybody happy if I don't come back."

"O.K.," Sean said. The fellow's grin was infectious. "I'm Sean—Sean Casey."

"I'm John Storm," the pilot said, and cocked an ear to the sound of the hail outside. "Well named, eh?"

Sean grinned. "May the better storm win."

Storm lit a cigarette and drew in a deep puff of smoke. Releasing it slowly, he spoke through the smoke. "When do we leave?"

"As soon as the ship is ready."

"That's pretty damn quick," Storm said. "All we gotta do is put a little extra gas in her. Let's go."

Sean hesitated for a moment. His scruples won out. "It's only fair that I tell you this much," he said. "We're heading for a spot I'm not even sure exists. If it does, I don't know what we may be getting into. Our chances are probably pretty slim of getting through the whole mess alive. You can back out if you want to."

"Thanks for telling me, Sean," Storm said. "But I've always been crazy and this is no time to change."

Sean's expression lightened. "Let's go," he said.

They spent a few minutes in a large office of the main terminal. Storm called the hangar to have them service the ship, and they signed a few papers. On their way out of the room, Sean saw one of the typists look up from her work. Her expression was worried. "Leaving again, Johnny?"

"Keep a light in the window for me," he said gayly.

"You be careful now," she demanded fiercely.

He grinned broadly and threw her a kiss. "Sure will, honey."

Another pretty girl stopped them in the hall. "Johnny," she said. "You aren't flying today."

"Sure am, honey," he said. "Miss me?"

"You're a fool, Johnny," she said, but her eyes belied her words.

They stopped for clearance and the weather. "I can't give you clearance in this stuff," the officer said, nodding at the window. "You wouldn't even get off the field."

"We'll take our chances," Sean said lightly.

"But we won't," the man said. "No ship takes off the airport in weather like this."

"The man said we're taking off, Bill," Storm said evenly. "It's our risk and we're taking it."

"This is important business," Sean added. "We aren't doing it for fun. But with or without clearance, we're taking off; if you want any confirmation, call this number in New York."

Sean handed him a card and they walked down the railing to the weather section. The girl got up, scanning a sheet she had just received. She was young and pretty. Sean turned his eyes away; he knew what was going to happen.

"Weather clearing a little west of here," she read automatically. "May slacken here in spots. Due to unusual conditions prevailing lately no prediction is advance— Johnny!"

She had raised her eyes from the sheet. "You aren't going out in that!" she exclaimed.

"Sure am, honey."

He leaned over the railing and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Be good," he said, and he and Sean walked away.

THE hail slackened a little and they made a run for the hangar. The ship was already warmed and waiting. They got in the huge plane, Sean sitting in the co-pilot's seat, and waited.

The hail had almost stopped. The field should have been knee-deep in ice but it melted rapidly in the sultry heat. It was raining now, hard, wind-swept rain. Storm looked at Sean questioningly. Sean jerked a thumb toward the ceiling.

Storm revved the engines and pulled the ship out of the hangar. The rain hammered at it; the wind rocked it. Storm sat a moment, feeling the plane's response. Then he

nodded. "She'll take it," he yelled, above the engines.

Sean nodded. Storm taxied her to the runway facing into the wind. It tried to lift the plane from the ground. The hail began falling again, lightly. Storm pushed the throttle slowly toward open. Within two hundred feet the plane was off the ground, jerking through the air with the gusts that caught at it.

Storm handled the controls casually, almost tenderly. Then the hail struck, hammering at the ship, thundering to break through. The thick glass on Sean's side cracked; the metal covering dented; and then they were through. Only the wind and rain buffeted them.

Storm cursed a little at the damage. Then he turned to Sean. "Where to?" he yelled.

Sean handed him a slip showing the latitude and longitude. Storm pursed his lips as if he were whistling softly. Then he looked at Sean and grinned. "What are we waiting for?" he shouted, and headed the ship out over the ocean.

It was hot below the equator, sizzling, and the cabin was not refrigerated. Here it was the middle of summer, and sometimes the sun or the burning moon beat down and heated the metal of the ship to scorching intensity. Then the rain came as a brief respite, and the winds and storms tossed the ship wildly.

They fled on and on into the South Pacific, searching for an island that was once sold to a man named Peterson, an island that might be desert, and might be anything. In the quiet moments, Sean rehearsed his arguments again and again. In the stormy ones, he helped Storm hold the plane to its course.

Storm turned to Sean one clear, bright moment on the morning of the second day and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "One hundred miles more, if my navigation is right," he said. "If it's there, how do we get in?"

Sean had told him the story during the lonely hours. If they failed, it wouldn't make any difference. If they succeeded, he would need an ally who knew what was going on.

Sean shrugged his shoulders. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Just set down and say 'here we are where's the brass band?'"

Sean grinned. "Maybe."

Storm went back to his wheel, but now they both watched below eagerly. The water was blue, bottomless, and without boundaries or features. It moved lazily in the sun.

A dot in the distance became a tiny, white coral island beneath, without vegetation, the water milky around it. Then nothing again. The hundred miles went by, and the monotony was unrelieved.

Storm smiled apologetically. "Those winds are hard to figure. It might be a hundred miles in any direction."

"Let's keep going the way we are," Sean said.

They kept going. Fifty miles more slipped behind them. Sean stirred uneasily. They couldn't do this indefinitely.

STORM was the first to see it. It looked like a gray, hazy bubble to the left, on the horizon. He banked the ship and sent it straight toward the spot.

"Ever see anything like that before?" Sean asked.

"Hell, no," Storm said. "And I don't think anyone else has either. There's nothing around here for hundreds of miles."

The bubble grew until it became a gray hemisphere sitting upon the blue ocean. It was difficult to see what lay behind that curtain. Shapes seemed to grow and change and quiver. When it was beneath them, there was a hint of buildings and spires below—or it might have been trees and mountains, or waves and steam.

They banked around it, searching for a hint to its nature, looking for an opening, something. It was expressionless, as blank as a mask. "Well?" Storm said.

"Bank above it," Sean said, and he walked back to the toolchest and pulled out a screwdriver.

He forced the door open against the slipstream. He looked down; the bubble was directly below. He tossed the screwdriver through the opening. Then he looked down, watching

the tool turn lazily over and over as it fell toward the gray hemisphere. It got smaller and smaller.

There was a flash and a lazy puff of smoke curling upward. Sean walked back to the cockpit. "See?" he asked.

Storm nodded. They looked at each other.

"They don't like visitors," Storm said.

"I guess not," Sean said. "Is the radio set up?"

Storm nodded.

"Just click the switch on the far right."

Sean clicked the switch and waited. Then he picked up the hand mike. "Hello, Peterson's Colony," he said steadily. "Hello, below. This is the plane flying overhead; we wish to enter. Please answer."

He switched to reception and waited. There was nothing, not even static. He flipped the sending switch again. "Hello, Peterson's Colony," he said. "This is an emergency. We must talk with you. Radio us instructions for landing. Answer."

Again there was nothing. Sean tried another wave length and another. He spun the dial to its limit in both directions. The air remained as silent as it was when they arrived. He repeated his message again and again. Nothing.

"Hello, Peterson's Colony," he said savagely. "We know the secret of your existence. We know who you are, what you are, where you are. You and the earth are threatened with destruction or slavery. This is a matter of your existence, as well. Don't be afraid; there are only two of us. Send us instructions for landing. Answer!"

There was only silence. Sean left the radio and walked slowly back to the cockpit. Storm raised an eyebrow. Sean shook his head. "Not a thing," he said.

Storm pointed at the gas gauge. "There isn't much more than enough to get us back," he said. "We have to do something soon."

Sean looked down at the gray hemisphere. "I know," he said.

He studied it for a long moment. "Why don't they answer?" he said suddenly. "Are they crazy or what?"

"Maybe they can't hear us," Storm said. "That thing stopped the screwdriver. Maybe it stops other things, too."

"Maybe that's it," Sean said. "Maybe they can't see us any better than we can see them, or hear us either. Maybe they don't know we're here." He thought about it for a moment. Then he shook his head. "If they're smart enough to do that"—he motioned to the hemisphere—"they should be smart enough to know we're here."

"Maybe they're all gone," Storm suggested. "Or dead."

"That's a happy thought," Sean said.

He turned away and tossed the problem in his mind. Below lay the one hope for the life and freedom of the world. Below lay death if they should try to penetrate the screen. But upon his decision rested not only his life and Storm's but the whole suffering people of earth. Go back or try to go in? What should he do?

He had done enough, he told himself. He had tried. What man could do more?

Oh, Casey — Pat, he muttered soundlessly, what shall I do?

"Wait a minute," he said.

He walked back to the radio, still waiting, still silent. He picked up the mike. "Peterson's Colony," he said coldly. "We're coming in. If you value your lives or your future do not try to stop us. This is your last chance; we're coming in."

He walked back to the cockpit. "Take her down," he said.

CHAPTER V

STORM nursed it down until it was skimming the water. Then he eased back on the throttle to cut flying speed. When the ship finally slipped into the water it was as smooth as a launching. They were beside the gray curtain, which was about one hundred yards away.

"Where now, cap'n?" grinned Storm.

"Edge a little closer and then circle the thing. Maybe we'll see something."

When they were little more than a wingspan away, there was still little

to see. The curtain came down to the water's edge and then stopped. The sea was calm and the meeting point between the curtain and the sea was steady. It was just a line.

That seemed odd to Sean, somehow, but he couldn't pin it down. Now that they were closer the shapes seemed clearer behind the barrier. The island seemed to rise gradually in a vague, hillock shape. And those were buildings, although their outlines wavered and faded. But there was no movement; possibly it was too far to see. Sean kept telling himself that it was too far to see.

Then their wake arrived at the curtain, and a line of steam arose where it splashed against the barrier. Sean looked at it, puzzled.

"Mighty powerful stuff," Storm said.

"All right, take her around," Sean said, in a bemused tone.

They taxied around the hemisphere. Everywhere it was the same. No thickening, no thinning of the barrier, just the same gray wall with the line of steam at the edge where the wake splashed. And it was bigger than it looked.

"Doesn't look like there's any way into this place, Sean," Storm said finally. "Like I said, I guess they don't like visitors."

Sean snapped his fingers. "That's it! Look there where the steam is rising."

"What do you mean?" Storm asked. "That's where the water hits it."

"Yes," Sean said triumphantly. "But it doesn't steam when the waves have quieted down."

Storm stared at him for a moment. Then his face cleared. "Maybe you're right."

"That has to be it," Sean said. "That curtain doesn't extend below the surface. It would take a tremendous amount of power to keep turning that water to steam. Taxi up a little closer."

Storm maneuvered the ship to within a few feet of the screen. Sean picked up an old broom and crawled out on the hull until he was on the prow. The sun burned down and the hull was frying-hot, but he stretched himself out and stuck the broom forward under the water. Nothing happened.

He drew it back. It was whole, uncharred, unblistered. He tried it again. This time he raised it a little high and he brought back a small piece of the handle.

Sean crawled back into the ship, sweating. "I was right," he said exultingly.

"When do we go in?" Storm asked.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," Sean said; "you don't go."

"Now, see here, Storm protested. "I signed up for the whole trip. Well, we aren't there yet."

"We may need to get away in a hurry," Sean said. "You'll have to be ready. And besides, someone has to guard the ship."

Storm agreed reluctantly. "It's your party," he said.

"Keep as close a watch as possible," Sean said.

He reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out his automatic. "Here," he said. "You may need this. If I'm not back or haven't sent word in exactly twenty-four hours, go back with what we've found out. Get in touch with Ed Stanton at this number in New York. Tell him everything that's happened."

He scribbled for a moment on a card and handed it to Storm.

"Got it," Storm said.

Sean took a deep breath. "You've done a good job, Johnny. You should get a medal."

"Be careful," Storm said. "You'd better swim as far as possible under water. No telling how thick that thing is. Good luck, Sean."

"If I don't get back"—Sean's voice was steady—"you might tell a girl named Pat Casey at the New York Globe that—that—"

"That what?" Storm asked softly.

"Oh, tell her she's the best thing that ever came out of Ireland."

SEAN walked to the door and crawled back to his position on the prow. He waved at Storm, took a deep breath, let it partway out, and dived.

The water was clear and warm. He pulled himself forward with long, powerful sweeps of his arms. His legs weren't much help, clothed and shod. He pulled himself beneath the

water, until his lungs began to burn and scream for air. And then he went a little farther.

Finally he came up, gasping, to the surface. He took a shuddering breath, another, and looked back. The curtain was over fifty feet behind him.

Sean turned and looked at the island. It was covered with buildings, white, even in the subdued light that came through the screen. There wasn't a spot of green, not a shrub or tree or blade of grass. Just the buildings, square and utilitarian, some of them towering close to the roof of the hemisphere.

But there was no one moving on the island; it appeared deserted. For the first time Sean noticed that it was cool. It wasn't that he was wet. The air was cool; the sun shone through the screen, but its rays were tempered.

At a point not very far away, there was a large, stone dock. Everywhere else the buildings came squarely to the water's edge and stopped, like a cliff. Sean stopped treading water and began to swim toward the dock.

On one of the stone pillars was a series of metal rings forming a ladder. Sean pulled himself, dripping, from the water and began to climb.

When his head came over the edge of the structure, he was prepared to glance hastily around and duck back; he wasn't prepared to look into the kindly eyes of an old man with a white beard. The old fellow had been seated on a chair back from the front, fishing over the side of the pier. Several brightly colored semi-tropical fish lay beside him.

He smiled at Sean. "You've been swimming," he said. "Swimming with your clothes on. I've often wanted to do that, but I'm getting too old now. I forget myself, however. Welcome, sir. Welcome to Peterson's Colony."

Sean stared at the buildings and back at the old man. He followed Sean's gaze and nodded, a little sadly. "You're right," he said. "We should have brought some artists or an architect. As it is, the colony is utilitarian—purely utilitarian."

There was something in the thought that seemed to depress him. He stared down at the fish around his chair as if comparing them with the island.

"Where is everybody?" Sean asked warily.

"There is a council. Everybody has gone."

"Why aren't you there?"

The old man sighed. "I have outlived my usefulness," he said. He looked up, a light shining in his eyes. "Perhaps someday there will be no old age, no senility. Perhaps it can be bred from the race, as imbecility or epilepsy can be bred out."

A wondering thought crept into Sean's mind. "Who are you?" he said.

"Me?" said the old man, as if surprised at interest in his identity. "I am an old man named Peterson."

"Peterson!" Sean breathed. "Then this is your colony."

"In name only," the old man said. "My children have gone far beyond my humble beginnings; they have gone very far."

"Then you can help me," Sean said eagerly. "The world needs you and your colony, Mr. Peterson."

"Yes," Peterson said, resting a hand in his beard, "that is what I thought. The world needed my colony. Even when I was most discouraged, that is what sustained me. Someday, I told myself, the world will be in serious trouble, will call for help, and we will answer."

"That time has come," Sean said slowly. "The world is in trouble now. I have come for help."

Peterson turned sorrowful eyes on Sean's eager, pleading face. "I wish," he said, "I wish—"

A cold, precise voice broke in behind them. "Peterson," it said, "you know it is forbidden."

In his excitement, Sean hadn't noticed the figures in loose-fitting tunics and trousers walking on to the dock. Now there was no excitement, no surprise at finding a dripping stranger on the shores of this isolated, shrouded island. Peterson sank back in his chair and turned slowly back to his fishing. Sean swung around to face the newcomers.

THEY were standing in a group, five of them, eying him humorlessly. "Who are you?" one of them asked.

He took a deep breath. "Sean Casey."

"How did you get here?"

Sean glanced down at his clothes. "Swam."

They didn't smile. Sean reflected that they were young to be so serious. The one slightly in front nodded at the others.

They stepped forward to group themselves around him. Sean tensed himself for a fight.

"Come along," the leader said.

Sean decided to come along. They walked briskly, in silence, off the dock and up the street. It was paved with the same materials that were used in the buildings and put together with such care that there wasn't a crack or an inequality—just the same, slightly-roughened surface everywhere.

The island had a definite rise toward the center, and they walked up a grade that had Sean breathing heavily in a few minutes. Finally they turned in at a building that looked as much like the rest as assembly-line cars. He was escorted to a desk behind which sat a slightly older man than his guards, but dressed identically.

"Sean Casey," the leader of the welcoming committee said. "He won't divulge how he got here."

"Very well," said the man behind the desk. "You may return to your work."

In a moment they were alone. Sean and the man behind the desk, in a windowless cubicle lit, mercilessly, from hidden sources. Sean looked around for another chair, but there was nothing else in the room. "Not a very friendly welcome," he said.

"We don't encourage visitors. Casey. How did you get here?"

Sean thought about it for a moment. "Airplane, of course," he said. They probably knew it anyway, and, if they didn't, they would find out soon enough.

"Where is it now?"

Sean wondered a little at his manner of speech. It was the same as the others, cold, metallic, precise. "Outside your curtain."

The man nodded. "You are Irish?" he asked.

"American."

"Naturalized?"

"No," Sean said.

The questions continued for sev-

eral minutes. Sean wondered what he was up to. He didn't seem like a person to waste words or time. Perhaps he was trying to analyze him before he asked the important questions, so that he could judge the validity of the answers.

"Occupation?"

Sean hesitated for a moment. "Reporter," he said. What good would that information do them?

"How did you learn of the existence and location of the colony?"

"Research."

"Why are you here?" the man asked.

"To ask for help," Sean said slowly. "The world needs your help. Only Peterson's Colony can save it from slow disintegration, destruction, or enslavement."

The man's eyes narrowed. "What led you to the conclusion that we would help?"

"You are the last hope," Sean said. "You must help. How can you refuse?"

The man didn't answer. He studied Sean through unrevealing eyes. Finally he rose from his chair and moved around the desk. "Come with me," he said.

THEY walked out into the street again. There were a few people there now, men and women, in what appeared to be the standard colony dress. They showed no curiosity at the sight of a stranger. And there were no children. Sean wondered at that.

They walked toward the centre of the island, still climbing.

"The colony was begun," the man said as they moved along, "to develop a better society and a better race. The world rejected us and our ideas; we owe it nothing. I want you to remember that."

"You owe it your lives," Sean objected. "Without the rest of the world you would have had no existence. It, at least, gave you a chance for life."

"The same debt is owed by the rest of the race to the amoeba, the fish, and the rest of the evolutionary cycle."

He shrugged it aside.

"We developed our society on necessarily rigid principles of proper matings, proper training, and proper discipline. The laws are inflexible as they must be in a truly scientific society. When the children are born they are removed from parental care and placed in general nurseries so that they will feel responsible to the society, not to the home or family group."

"Why are you telling me this?" Sean asked.

"So that you can understand."

It isn't that, Sean thought. It's a desire for admiration.

"When the children reach the age of discrimination their real training begins."

He led the way into another building, half-way up the slope to the central peak. They looked in a gymnasium class of children doing vigorous calisthenics. They were of varying ages and sizes, sweat beading their faces, all seriously intent on what they were doing. They were silent, no laughing or giggling, no talking. Sean felt something cold creep into his heart.

Another room was a classroom, filled with children of grade school age, bent studiously over desks. And the instructor was lecturing on advanced physics.

The inspection continued, class by class of students far advanced beyond their ages. All the courses were fundamentally scientific in nature.

They went back into the street and continued their journey toward the building marking the centre of the island.

"When the children have completed their training, they are matched to fitting occupations in the various laboratories, hydroponic gardens or theoretical sciences. As much work as possible is done by machine. There is no drudgery. Couples are mated by the central council and produce children as scheduled. The intelligence and health quotient is rising steadily."

"And what does all this lead to?" Sean asked, sickened.

"To a better society and a better race," the man said coldly. "Both planned, not allowed to grow or de-

teriorate haphazardly. It is a work which must not be interrupted or endangered."

"Endangered?" Sean asked.

"We have always realized that the world would not hesitate to destroy us if it became aware of our presence."

They were in front of the large building dominating the island.

"You will see the Spokesman and the higher council," the man said, "but I am afraid the answer will be 'no'."

THE higher council was composed of men of thirty-five or forty years of age. Sean presented his plea strongly.

"The world's fate rests in your hands, gentlemen," Sean said. "The moon, as you know, has become another, smaller sun. It alone is creating terrible havoc and will decimate the earth's population in a few years."

"That condition does not trouble us," said the man seated in the centre at the long, raised table.

"I know," Sean said; "you have your screen, which protects you. That is what the rest of the world needs for survival. Give us the secret."

"We will take it into consideration," the Spokesman said.

"Just before I left here," Sean continued, "we learned the reason for the moon's explosion. A space ship from an alien star system set off a chain reaction on it as the first step in the conquest of earth. They demand earth's complete surrender to their domination."

"What are the consequences of refusal?" asked the other.

"They will force the moon out of its orbit toward the earth until it disintegrates and makes the earth uninhabitable. They demand that the governments of earth disarm completely as a preliminary to surrender."

"Will the governments surrender?"

"What else can they do?" Sean asked. "They have no choice. But you, with your greater scientific knowledge, might be able to devise a method of protecting earth and defeating the aliens."

"Why should we do this?" asked the Spokesman.

"To save the earth!" Sean exclaimed. "However bitterly you may feel toward the rest of the world, the fact remains we are your brothers. No matter how far away you are, you are still part of us, sprung from the same fathers, nurtured by the same civilization, culture, traditions bred in the same philosophies."

"Is there no better reason than that?"

Sean looked at them. When he went on his voice was cold. "To save your own necks," he said. "If earth defies the aliens, even you could not survive the rain of disintegrating matter. And if the earth surrenders, the aliens will either conquer you or destroy you."

"Is that all?" the other asked.

Sean hesitated a moment. "Yes," he said.

The Spokesman looked down the line of faces on each side of him. To Sean they were inscrutable, but they must have meant something to the other. He nodded and turned back to Sean.

"Hear this, then, before we announce our decision. We bear no love for the rest of the world. It cast us out when it might have furthered our progress. It would destroy us if it were aware of us and if it could."

"You can't condemn a whole people for the actions of a government or a few governments!"

"We met with nothing but hatred everywhere," the Spokesman said. "The only ones who understand or sympathize are on this island with, perhaps, a few exceptions."

"People are slow to accept new things," Sean argued. "You can't sentence them to death because they are not educated to your movement."

"We not only can, we do," tolled the other. "They do not deserve to live. They are not friends or brothers, but enemies. Let them perish!"

"But what of the danger to you?" Sean protested.

Sean read no concern on any face.

"We will meet that as we have met everything else—alone."

"Must I take this message back to

your former homes, your relatives, your friends?"

"We have no home but this, no relatives nor friends but what are here. And you will not return."

SEAN started. The council rose as if by signal and began to file from the room. Only the Spokesman remained.

"You will remain here," the other said.

For a moment Sean entertained wild hopes that the Spokesman wanted to say something that the others should not hear, but that dream was soon shattered.

"Your ship is outside," the man said.

"Yes."

"We presume there is another person in it."

"Presume away," Sean shrugged.

"You will send a radio message to him, instructing him to come in as you did, that all is well."

The man shrugged. "We will find another way."

"What will you do with us?"

"You are unfit to take an equal place in the colony. You will be offered a choice: death or menial labor."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will have no choice."

Sean's tone changed, it became fawning; under its flattery the man behind the broad table drew himself a little straighter.

"I don't know what to do; you people are so smart. You know so many things—all the inventions you have made."

"Only the Spokesman of the higher council knows them all."

"You, sir!" Sean exclaimed. "But surely you don't remember all the details in your head?"

"Of course," the man said, scornfully. "It is a simple matter for a person with Colony training."

"Then why don't you save the earth," Sean suggested slyly. "You would be hailed as the savior of the world and everyone would be eternally thankful to the Colony."

The Spokesman eyed him coldly. "That has been decided," he said.

Sean slipped his hand into his

pocket. It would have to be that, then. There was no other choice.

When he brought his hand out, there was a knife in it. With one swift motion the blade clicked out, wicked and shining in the cruel, diffused light of the room, and Sean threw himself in a slide across the table. The Spokesman sat there, paralyzed.

Sean grabbed his tunic at the throat, pulling it mercilessly tight against his neck until the man could scarcely breathe. His right hand held the knife blade a few inches from the man's chest.

"One sound," Sean said savagely, "and I'll cut your heart out."

THE spokesman turned a little white. "Don't be a fool," he said, when he regained his voice. "You can't get out of here if you kill me."

Sean laughed. "I don't want to kill you unless I have to. If you're good I may not have to."

"What do you want me to do?" The man's voice was shaky.

"You're not so brave now," Sean said harshly. "You're not so willing to save yourself and let the rest of the world go hang."

The Spokesman tried to get a grip on himself. Sean tightened the tunic around his throat and moved the knife blade a little closer. The blade gleamed suggestively. He crumpled. Sean watched him, hating him, hating himself.

Sean threw him back in his chair and swivelled around off the table behind him. "Get up."

The man got up, shaking.

"You're going with me," Sean said. "You'll take me where I want to go, as if we were going about business for you. If you make any signal or give anything away, if anyone tries to stop us or save you, if anything interferes, I'll run this knife in you before anyone can get close enough to stop me."

"But—but they'll see the knife!" the man protested.

"Don't worry," Sean sneered. "The knife will be concealed by my sleeve. All right. Start walking!"

"Where?" he asked, walking toward the door.

"Down the hill to the left."

They walked to the door. A man approached them questioningly, but the Spokesman waved him away. "Casey has agreed to assist us."

They walked down the inclined street side by side. This time Sean was glad of the calm acceptance of the men and women on the streets. He felt the cold steel of the knife blade on his arm, shivered, and steadied himself sharply. It wouldn't do to show his prisoner that he was afraid.

Sean placed a light hand on the other's arm. A tremor shook it. Sean released the arm, reassured.

Men and women who passed them murmured greetings to the Spokesman. He nodded in return. It was all commonplace and ordinary, but underneath lay a tension between Sean and his prisoner that might flare any moment into catastrophe. Sean dared not think of what lay on his actions and his success. Sweat popped out on his forehead in spite of the coolness beneath the gray dome.

Sean measured his progress in fractions. Half the distance was behind, then three quarters, a few hundred feet left. Then they were on the dock and no one was around. No one was watching them. No one except Peterson, the old man, who was still fishing over the side of the dock.

"Where are you taking me?" the Spokesman whispered.

"You'll see," Sean hissed, jabbing him in the back with his thumb.

The Spokesman almost collapsed. He staggered out on the dock. Peterson looked up. "A pleased expression crossed his face. 'Oh, hello,' he said. 'Back again. Hello. Corder.'"

"Yes, Mr. Peterson," Sean said. "We're back."

"Going swimming again?" Peterson asked.

"Yes," Sean said. "Both of us."

"Oh," Peterson said, a shadow of a smile crossing his face. "I didn't know Corder liked to swim with his clothes on."

"He doesn't, particularly," Sean grinned. "He's just going along to keep me company. And don't worry

about anything, Mr. Peterson. I think everything's going to be all right."

"That's nice," Peterson said. "Have a nice swim. Have a nice swim. Corder."

Sean turned to Corder. "We'll swim straight out," he said. "If you try anything funny I'll rip your stomach open. And I warn you, I'm like a fish in the water."

Sean slipped the knife from his sleeve. Corder shivered and cast him a mute glance of appeal. Sean clamped the hilt of the knife between his teeth, thinking what a fierce, piratical appearance he made. He grabbed Corder by the arm and dived.

Behind him he heard a splash. As he came up Corder was choking and spluttering.

"All right," Sean said fiercely, removing the knife from his mouth. "Swim!"

He emphasized his command by a motion with the knife. Corder started swimming. Sean replaced the knife between his teeth and followed.

THE line of the screen was only a couple of hundred yards away, but it seemed like forever before it was at hand.

"Hold it a minute," Sean said.

He turned to look back. The dock was still deserted except for the figure of the old man. But Peterson was on his feet, waving at them. He seemed almost gay.

Sean turned back to the screen with a lighter heart. He looked at the water-soaked Corder once more. He was shaking, even in the water. Sean removed the knife again.

"Can you swim under water?"

Corder shook his head, fear gleaming in his eyes. Sean nodded regretfully, reached out, and brought the knife hilt down solidly on Corder's head. The man gave a groan and relaxed in the water.

Quickly Sean placed his feet under the other's arm pits and dived, pulling Corder down with him. He swam powerfully, making strong, sweeping strokes with his arms, the dead weight of Corder dragging behind. At last he had to come up. He glanced back; the barrier was well behind them.

Corder floated to the surface. Sean

turned him over, so that his face was out of the water. He was still unconscious. He had probably swallowed a lot of water.

Sean glanced around for the plane. For one despairing moment he thought that it was gone. Then he turned another quarter and it was there, almost behind him.

The sun was sizzling on the water as Sean hauled Corder's unconscious form to the hull and hammered on it. Storm appeared in the doorway, gun in hand. He gasped as he saw Sean.

"What've you got?" he said when he had hauled the two aboard.

Sean started pumping water out of Corder's lungs. "The answer," he said. "Let's get going."

Sean walked into the newsroom followed by Corder and Storm. Corder glared hatred at Sean's back; he was sweating and his face seemed a little bruised and puffy. Storm made himself at home immediately.

There was a hail of greetings and questions from the reporters. They got up and clustered around the three.

"Say! Where've you been?"

"What's all the mystery in Ed's office?"

"Yeah—more queer ducks in there than there is in Central Park."

"What've you been doing with yourself?"

"What's the scoop?"

A couple of big, efficient-looking men moved from the managing editor's office to break it up. Sean jerked a thumb at Corder and they placed themselves on either side of him and urged him along.

Sean was following, when he caught sight of Casey. He touched her hair lightly. "Hello, Casey," he said, a little huskily.

"Hello, you Irish bum," she said. Her smile was a little tremulous.

"Who's this?" Storm asked in his most interested tone.

"Oh, Johnny," Sean said. "I gave you a false name. Mine's O'Shaughnessy."

"I know," Storm said, his eyes on Pat; "I've seen pictures."

"And this is Pat Casey," Sean said.

"If you don't mind," Storm said absently, "I think I'll stay

out here. I wouldn't be any use to you."

Sean shrugged his shoulders, walked to the door, and looked back. Storm was leaning over Pat's desk, talking eagerly, and she was looking up, completely absorbed.

SEAN sighed and walked into Ed's office, closing the door behind him. There was a large group crowded into the room. Sean recognized Lyons, Stewart, Davis, several other scientists and engineers, some high-placed Washington officials, some high-ranking naval and army officers, and a few others. The rest must be F.B.I. men, he thought.

"We wired you most of the story Aug. Science Fiction Quar. Take II Gal. 4 The Sun Came Up Last from San Francisco," Sean said. "You can get the rest of the details later. Right now I want you to hear the solution."

He prodded Corder. "Go ahead. Tell them what to do about the moon."

Corder licked his lips. "You can use the same device we use to protect the colony and furnish it with power. Propel four rockets with the proper equipment to positions which will form a square completely obscuring the moon from the earth. The equipment will set up a screen which will block any radiations desired."

"Tell them the other advantages, Corder," Sean urged.

"These radiations, when being screened, will generate power," Corder said bitterly. "This power can be broadcast and picked up any place in the world with the use of relaying equipment, either on earth or in space. You can allow as much or as little radiation to slip through as you wish and select between radiations."

"That's fantastic," Davis said.

"We'll get to you in a minute, Davis," Sean said. "Corder will give you the technical details of the rocket, screening, and broadcast machinery. But first, Admiral, I think the United States had better send a fleet to force the surrender of the Peterson Colony."

The Admiral nodded.

"That will be taken into immediate consideration."

"It shouldn't be too difficult," Sean said. "Although they have atomic weapons, they can be overwhelmed by force. Their screen can be set to stop any radiation or material object, but I doubt if it could stand up under the sudden energy charge of an atomic bomb. And certainly one could be exploded beneath the screen, either slipped in under the water or set off just outside."

Ed looked at him oddly.

"I think, however," Sean went on, "that they will surrender on threat of destruction."

The scientists had gathered around Corder, jotting down figures and notes, gabbling excitedly and exclaiming in amazement as the scientist outlined the theoretical and technical details of the plan for harnessing the moon's destructive power.

"Well, Ed," Sean said with a tired smile, "it looks like it will be a blessing after all. This will end the earth's power needs for a long, long time, and it can be made to provide a tempering of climate where needed."

"How did you do it?" Ed exclaimed. "How did you get Corder to come with you and give up his secrets?"

"Ob, it wasn't hard, once you understood them," Sean explained. "They'd been living safely, without fear or conflict, so long that actual danger, threat of death or injury, had a disproportionate affect on them."

"What did you mean about Davis?"

"Quite a high percentage of scientists all over the world were in on the secret of the Colony and helped them all they could," Sean said. "Even the threat of extinction for the world couldn't induce them to reveal its secret. Some of them, I have reason to believe, have either committed or attempted to commit murder. It is a misplaced loyalty which will have to be corrected."

"Wait a minute!" Ed said suddenly. "We're forgetting the most important thing. What good will all this do us? There's still the alien ship and its ultimatum."

EVERYBODY in the room looked up quickly at that. Sean glanced at the Colony scientist. "We won't have to worry about that, will we, Corder?" he said.

The scientist's face tightened.

"You see," Sean said, "the whole thing was the Colony's idea. They sent out the spaceship, started a chain reaction on the moon, and sent the message—all in order to remove a threat to their colony. They felt that earth was sure to surrender. At the least they could destroy all the arms and armaments on earth, and at the best they could rule the whole planet as alien conquerors.

"Thus they could protect themselves and institute their ideas on a world-wide scale. An added incentive was the greater power supply it provided their colony. They had no means, of course, of forcing the moon from its orbit, but the threat was sufficient."

The Admiral exploded. "Why, we'll blow them out of the water!"

"No," Sean said sharply. "That is the only-too-typical reaction they were afraid of. We need them, and they need us. They have a great amount of knowledge and great capabilities for adding more. The Colony was both a success and a failure. Its failure was that it withdrew from humanity. It got too far away from us and became elite, a clan, apart from the general race.

"They need the rest of the world for balance. The Colony should be broken up, true, but its members should be redistributed throughout the world, re-educated to the humanities which it lacked. If you destroy them, you destroy at the same time that immense store of information and intelligence and plant the seeds of distrust and rebellion among the scientists and people of the world for future generations to sow."

The Admiral nodded slowly. Sean looked at Corder. His look of sullen hatred had changed to an expression that might have been gratitude.

"The tragedy of the situation," Sean

said, "is whether Peterson's ideas might not have been successful under different circumstances. Perhaps, when humanity is better prepared for them, they may receive another trial."

There was silence in the room for a moment.

"And, Admiral," Sean said softly, "when you get there, take special care of an old man named Peterson."

Ed seized his hand and wrung it.

"Sean," he said earnestly, "you've done a wonderful thing. I'm going to see that you and Storm are properly rewarded—Hey! Where are you going?"

Sean turned at the door. "I have to see whether a trap is still baited."

SEAN stopped a few feet from the desk. Storm and Pat were still deeply engrossed in conversation. Sean saw the look on Pat's face as she listened eagerly, read it, and turned away, the muscles tightening around his mouth. There was something irresistible about Storm.

"Sean!" Pat cried, and there was an urgent note in her voice.

She ran to him and turned him toward her. "Are you still afraid?"

He forced a smile. "Still afraid," he said, "but no longer afraid of myself."

He started to turn away but she pulled him back. "I have something to ask you."

"I'll give you the answer now," Sean said gently. "It's still woman's choice."

"Well, you Irish bum," she said, "I choose you!"

Suddenly, without volition, his arms were around her and hers were clinging to his neck. "Tell me," she whispered, "am I still the best thing that ever came out of Ireland?"

Over her shoulder Sean caught sight of Storm's grinning face. Sean's answer was properly muffled.

THE END

NO MORE PENCILS

By JOQUEL KENNEDY

Pug Stevens wasn't interested in digging up old Martian relics . . . but when he dug up an old Martian itself . . . !

THE city was, oh, such a wonderful place! It must have been designed for hide and seek. You could duck into a little crumbling doorway where the shadows had gathered for centuries; you could crouch down, holding your breath, and whoever was it would run by. Pipes like hollow three-trunks tunnelled under the street: there wasn't any water in them now. Lying inside, you could hear footsteps go thudding right over your head—

But Miss Wipple put a stop to the game. "Gertrude! Otto! Gregory! You come right here this minute! One of those towers might fall on you and we'd never even find your body—Laura! Spit out that gum. Now stay close beside me, all of you—we're only on Mars for today, remember, so let's spend every moment learning things."

Miss Wipple was explaining the commonly accepted theory that the Martians had all been killed by a terrible plague, but ten-year-old Pug Stevens didn't hear very much of Miss Wipple's explanation. He was busy listening to the winds that sang like melancholy ghosts between the towers, busy trying to decide whether the winds were saying words.

Time had eaten away the towers. Of some, only a single wall remained standing. Pug thumped the walls to see if they'd collapse; one of them did, with a rior that made the ground shake.

"Peter Stevens!"

Pug stood transfixed.

"What did you do to that wall?"

"Nothing, Miss Wipple. I just touched it and it fell down."

"Peter, I'm not going to stand for any more of your nonsense! That tower you've destroyed was priceless—do you realize that?—priceless from a historical point of view. I'm

going to deal with you severely when we get home!"

She resumed her discussion of Martian architecture.

They ate lunch on the bank of a dried-up canal. One boy got too near the edge and tumbled in; when he crawled out he was covered all over with red dirt. He looked very funny. Miss Wipple said he did it on purpose and sent him back to the rocket for an hour.

AT three o'clock they straggled back to the valley where the spaceship sat like a metal egg poked on end in the ground. The valley was a mile-wide bowl of rocks, red sand, and scrubby plants. On the rim of the bowl, the city stuck broken fingers into the sky.

"Aww-w-w, Miss Wipple, do we have to go home so soon?"

"Please, Miss Wipple, can't we stay just a little bit longer?"

"Well," the teacher relented, "I suppose it will be all right. If I let you play here for another hour, will you promise not to leave the valley? Perhaps you can find some souvenirs. Why, only last week when the sixth grade were here, someone dug up a beautiful plastic sandal that must have belonged to an ancient Martian! Won't it be exciting if you can bring home something like that? Now I want you back here at four o'clock. Promptly!"

In truth, Miss Wipple welcomed a little more time on Mars. The pilot of the spaceship had wide shoulders, a bronze tan, an interesting grin. Miss Wipple's twenties had slipped quickly by, without any offers of matrimony; she had made up her mind that her thirties were going to be different.

"Yahoo!"

"We've got another hour!"

"That big dune's mine to dig in!"

The kids scattered like spilled mercury. All but two of them.

"Otto," said Pug as they trudged across the sand.

"What?"

"Would you be very excited if you found the old shoe off a Martian?"

"Not very," Otto admitted.

"Well, we'd better start looking anyway; Miss Wipple will be mad if we don't dig up something."

They broke sticks from a thorn-bush and poked around in the sand for a few minutes. It was more fun to duel with the sticks. They parried. Pug tapped Otto in the stomach twice. "Drop dead!" he shrieked. "I got you square through the belly!"

"Aaa-a-ah, you never touched me!"

"How much you wanna bet I didn't? You're dead, boy!"

"I quit," said Otto; "you don't fight fair."

Pug's ire was aroused. He prided himself on his sportsmanship. "Oh don't I? Take off your glasses and I'll show you how fair I fight!"

"I won't fight," said Otto.

"Yaaa-a-a. If they broke you open, your guts'd be yellow. Look. I'll draw a line. Come on, step over it, I double dare you—just take one step, that's all!" The end of Pug's stick scraped a little ditch in the sand.

Clink! Something made a sound like glass being hit.

Pug's jaw sagged. He prodded the sand again. This time some of the sand brushed away and a patch of brightness glittered into view.

He sucked in his breath. He dove for the shining thing, but Pug was faster. Pug's hand plowed into Otto's face, shoving Otto's nose flat. "It's mine! I found it!" Pug cried.

"I only wanted to look at it," Otto grumbled.

On hands and knees Pug examined his find. He let out a whistle of surprise. "Holy space! This ain't no old shoe! C'mere, Otto, help me dig!"

Excitedly, they scooped sand away. Soon the burnt-red sunlight shone on a hemisphere of glassy stuff like an upside-down goldfish bowl. "Keep digging," Otto gritted. "There's more of it buried yet."

Pug's arms burrowed deep into the

sand. "I—I've got it, almost!" Teeth clenched. Sweat ran. Ten-year-old muscles tightened into knots. Pug grunted and heaved and slowly the mass came free.

It was a transparent case, perhaps forty inches from end to end. Something red and wrinkled lay inside. An enormous head. Thin, tapering hands. Great eyes, larger than teacups, closed as if in sleep.

"It's—it's a man!"

"It's a Martin," Pug breathed.

"But—but there aren't any more Martins! Miss Wipple said all animal life on Mars is ex—ex—"

"Extinct," Pug finished. "That means dead."

"Is this one dead?"

"I don't know. It looks like a picture I saw in my Dad's doctor books of a baby when it's still inside the mother!"

"But this looks old!" Otto's voice was edged with wonder. "It's all kind of . . . shrivelled up!"

"Look! said Pug. "It's not heavy—I—I can carry it!"

His knees buckled beneath the weight.

"Watch out!" Otto squealed.

Pug fought to keep his grip on the slippery surface. The case executed a neat flip in the air and bounced off a rock. There was a sickening tinkle of broken glass.

"Oh—oh," said Otto. "Now you've done it."

Pug felt his insides slowly turning to ice. "I—I didn't meant to do it!" he quavered. "It just slipped!"

The "Martin" was stirring. Wrinkled hands beat like bird wings in the air. The great eyelids flickered . . . slowly parted . . . and then the "Martin" was looking right at them.

There weren't any pupils in his eyes.

Water! The thought leaped into their minds: wetness flowing in colorless drops, liquid and cool. The thought was a hundred times more vivid than a spoken word.

"Martin wants water!" said Otto.

"He's thirsty!"

"I'll get him some!" Pug yipped. "Stay with him! Don't let him get away!" His feet chopped sand as he struggled for the rocket.

MISS Wipple had been progressing nicely. She had just been remarking to the pilot that it must be wonderful to guide a ship through the infinite spaces, and the pilot replied how much more wonderful it was to guide young minds, and the pilot was sitting very close to her. Then footsteps went thumm thumm thumm on the ladder outside. The port hanged open and Pug came stampeding in.

"Miss Wipple! Got anything I can carry water in?"

"What do you want to carry water for?" she snapped.

Pug hesitated. It wouldn't do to tell Miss Wipple about Martin yet; she might spoil all the fun.

"I—I want to water a plant I found."

"All right, then—take that canteen but be sure you don't lose it."

"Oh no, ma'am, I won't." Pug snatched up the canteen, pressed it to the drinking fountain until water ran over the top. Then off he scampered, not bothering to screw the stopper on. The port clanged after him.

Damn brat, thought Miss Wipple. The pilot chuckled. "Aren't kids great? With enthusiasm over a plant! Doris, I'll trade jobs with you any day—you must get real kick out of teaching youngsters like that."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Wipple with a demure smile, "it's really not a job—it's a pleasure."

WHEN Pug got back with the water, Martin was sitting up.

"You spilled half of it," said Otto.

"Well what did you expect? I had to run with it, didn't I?" Pug stood there catching his breath. "Has he been talking to you?"

"Well—yes, I guess so—only he doesn't talk, exactly. He just thinks something and it's there inside your head. But his thoughts don't come out the same way ours do. It—it makes me feel funny to listen to him!"

Martin sipped water slowly.

Come . . . you . . . from where? The question was clear and unmistakable.

"We come from Earth," said Pug excitedly. "You know. Earth. Terra. Third planet." With a stick he scratched four lopsided circles. The

sand, then set a big rock in the center. "That's the sun in the middle there and those circles are the orbits of the planets. This one's Mercury and that's Venus, and Earth—that's where we come from—and here's Mars. Savvy?"

Martin nodded. Styly, insistently, the thought crept forth: Water . . . like this . . . on Earth . . . there is?

"Water? Oh sure, oceans and oceans of it. Earth is three-fourths covered with water—that's what our geography book says."

"Ask him how he got here," said Otto.

Martin had heard the question. His eyes narrowed to crescents; his wrinkled mouth frowned in concentration. Rapidly, he sketched pictures in their minds.

"Better than television," Pug breathed.

The city was young. Its towers were white—not stained red with dust, not crumbling. Beside a canal, a handful of "Martins" stood, watching the waters fall lower. Islands of mud emerged and joined other islands until at last no water flowed. And then the "Martins" walked back to their city and entered glass cases, to sleep until a better time should come. Machines shelved the cases row on row in vaults beneath the city. Machines scooped holes in the desert, deposited other sleepers, and brushed the sand back again carefully, like robots planting glass seeds. Then the machines stood idle in the desert and the last rains of Mars washed metal into rust until the machines fell down and blended with the sand.

The pictures ended.

PUG's lips worked a long time before words spilled out: "Those vaults underneath the city! Maybe—maybe the others are alive yet!" And deep down inside, he was praying: Let Martin take us there. Let me and Otto open some more glass cases and bring all the Martins back to life . . . In his mind's eye, he stood upon a flag-draped platform in front of wildly cheering throngs, while the President of the United States hung solid gold stars all over his chest.

Behind slitted eyes, Martin was

making plans. We . . . shall go, his answer finally came.

"Whoops!" yelled Otto, turning cartwheels.

Martin raised himself as if he weighed a ton. His withered legs collapsed from under him and he tumbled helplessly in the sand.

"Aw," said Pug sympathetically "he shouldn't try to walk. He's been sleeping in that case so long his legs have shrunk."

"What'll we do?"

"We'll just have to carry him. That's all."

Gently as though he were picking up a kitten, Pug cradled Martin in his arms.

Nobody watched them leave the valley.

THEY had come far—just how far beneath the city, Pug couldn't even guess. They had ripped aside bricks from the spot Martin had indicated, and as they plodded downward Pug had counted steps until he couldn't count any more.

Their feet kicked up puffs of dust that got into their noses and made them sneeze. Pug was happy. He was thinking: Nobody, not even the scientists and explorers, ever saw what we're seeing now! The beam of Otto's pocket flash swept picture-covered walls. "Martins" planted and harvested . . . hunted long-dead animals . . . dredged a network of canals across the sands. There were pockmarks in the pictures where precious stones had dropped out long ago.

Martin lay quietly in Pug's arms. From time to time a thought stole forth: To the left . . . stairway turns. Take care . . . next step . . . broken. Now stairs and . . . corridor begins.

The dust grew deeper, overflowed their shoes. Pug listened, half expecting the chitter of rats, but in the shadows of the corridor the only sound was the thud of his own footfalls and Otto's faintly echoing. Pug caught a snatch of Martin's thoughts. Weapons, the thoughts ran over and over again. Workable yet? A question, worried and impatient. Must find. Determination. And then the thoughts retreated and grew secret and Pug couldn't follow them any more.

In one place, stone blocks had

tumbled down, almost walling up the passageway. They had to do some climbing before they could go on. "Pug," said Otto, "don't—don't you think maybe we ought to stop? I mean—wouldn't it be better if we just said goodbye to Martin and came back some other time, maybe?"

"Huh!" Pug snorted. "You're not turning chicken on me! For cripesake, Otto, the other kids would just about die to be here now!"

A block of stone, dislodged by their voices, boomed somewhere in the darkness.

"Well, I wouldn't," Otto snuffled.

Just ahead, the beam of the flashlight shone on doors of black corroded metal. There were a couple of funny things about the doors. For one thing, they came together horizontally, not vertically, in the middle. For another thing, the doors were graven with a strange design: a maze of lines that twisted in and out of itself. The way Pug felt when he looked at it, he had felt one time before. Once, at a carnival, he had peered into a basket full of snakes.

Martin squirmed impatiently in Pug's arms. Down! he commanded. Can . . . now . . . walk! He tumbled out of Pug's grasp. Eagerness seemed to give strength to his withered legs. He staggered toward the doors, found and pressed a hidden stud. Suddenly with a rasp the doors parted, one sliding upward, the other dropping, like the jaws of a dead man opening.

LIGHT surged into their eyes. Blinded, Pug and Otto groped their way across the threshold, following Martin. They found themselves within a chamber so vast that it took a full minute to soften into its right proportions. At one time or another during his ten year life, Pug had visited Mammoth Cave, Grand Central Rocketport, and the Capitol Building in New Washington. But all those places seemed miniature now, beside the immensity of the room. An eerie white radiance filtered through the walls, in which marbles of radioactive materials were imbedded. If he squinted, Pug could barely make out the ceiling.

In the centre of the room stood a bubble of glass about four x 1

high, shaped like a mushroom on a stem. Martin skittered toward it. He seems awful anxious about something, thought Pug.

The little red man hammered at the crown of the mushroom with rolled-up fists. The glass shattered, and Martin thrust quivering arms into the opening he had made. He drew forth a golden jar with serpentine handles, which he set on the floor very carefully, he fished into the broken mushroom again and again, produced cones, blocks, pyramids . . . vases with bright green spots all over . . . yellow cylinders covered with spikes, Martian thoughts filled the room, gloating and exultant: Safe . . . after . . . such a long time!

Pug was itching with curiosity. What in heck was so important about a pile of old crockery? The Martian's back was turned now. Placing one foot after the other stealthily, Pug edged toward the collection of pyramids and globes and cones. Martin was hunched over, examining one of the bright-colored objects, apparently too deeply engrossed to notice Pug. A fat, gold-speckled jar caught Pug's fancy. He grabbed it.

Martin, Pug concluded, must have eyes in the back of his head someplace. The little red man suddenly whirled—a clawlike hand shot out, wrenched the jar from Pug's grasp.

Pug scowled. "Aaa-a-ah, you don't have to get so uppity—I wasn't going to hurt your jug!"

Amusement flickered briefly across Martin's face. Watch, he thought at them. He pointed the mouth of the jar toward the floor and carefully squeezed. There was a blinding flash as a beam darted out—and when the beam vanished, a small round pit in the floor remained.

"Whew!" Pug breathed. "If I had one of those jars, I could lick a whole army, I bet!"

For the first time, Martin smiled. Suddenly Pug remembered. "The other sleepers!"

Martin's gesture swept the room. "You mean," said Pug unbelievably, "there are that many."

Lower, Martin selected a large cone, held it like a peppermint stick. He pointed a finger to the cone's base. At the point, rays came.

The rays bit into one of the shining walls and ate deep. A slice of the wall melted, and through the opening they could see shelves of sleeping Martians like embryos in laboratory bottles.

Otto was leaping up and down with excitement. "Oboboyoboy! Wait'll I tell the other kids about this!"

Martin seemed interested. Other beings . . . like you . . . how many came?

"Eighteen fellas and girls — not counting Miss Whipple, that is."

Miss Whipple?

"She's our teacher," Pug explained.

For a moment, it was as though a finger had been touched lightly to Pug's brain. The invisible finger probed gently, then withdrew. Somehow, Pug had a feeling that Martin knew all about Miss Whipple now.

Again, Martin attempted a withered smile. He succeeded in looking like a death's head.

Gifts I have . . . for you . . . not for . . . Miss Whipple . . . bring the others . . . here.

Pug's eyes bulged. "You mean all the kids?"

Bring . . . all . . . of them.

"You betcha, Marty! We'll bring 'em! You just wait right here!"

EIGHTEEN kids, digging in the sand, glanced up. Two clouds of dust were rolling down the valley. As the clouds drew nearer, they developed voices.

"Hey, you guys!"

"And the girls too!"

"C'mere and listen!"

"Aaa-a-ah, Pug's got a bee in his pants again," somebody snickered. But just the same, the diggers dropped their sticks and legged over to see what all the shouting was about. Soon a ring of questioning faces surrounded Otto and Pug.

"We found a Martian!" Pug panted.

"You're nuts!" hooted the ring.

"Honest! Cross my heart and hope to die we did! He took us down underneath the city and showed us little jars that can blow the whole world apart! If you think I'm fibbing come on and see for yourselves!"

Scepticism was slipping from the circle of faces. Pug's story sounded

good. They really wanted to believe it.

"Well-I-I — Miss Whipple said we aren't supposed to leave the valley."

"Ah, we'll be back in ten minutes; she won't even miss us."

"And the Martin said he had presents for everybody," Otto chimed in. That clinched it.

"Let's go!" someone shouted.

"Well let's go, then," said a fat girl, "but if there isn't any Martin, we'll toss you in the canal, Pug Stevens."

"There's a Martin, all right," promised Pug.

A LONG the corridor, twenty excited children shoved and jostled. Boys shouted to make stone blocks crash down and scare the girls. The girls giggled nervously. And somebody struck up the age-old chant—

No more pencils, no more books!

No more teacher's ugly looks!

One girl started sobbing—she was scared, she wanted to go home—but they slapped her until she just whimpered and didn't cry out loud any more.

"Jeez, what kind of presents are we going to get?"

"Atom guns!"

"Time travel machines!"

"Gold and—and diamonds!"

"No," said Otto with an air of superiority, "it'll be better than that. You'll see."

And then the flashlight cast a yellow moon on the doors where geometric snakes coiled. Something about the doors made all the talking and laughter stop. Pug stumbled forward, his fingers groping for the stud. Even before he found it, the doors yawned wide—and the children clumped into the room, rubbing the light from their eyes.

A semicircle of "Martins" stood watching.

The children halted. They stared. They wanted to turn, wanted to run, wanted to be a thousand miles away, but none would show the others he was afraid. It just couldn't be. The whole thing was a scare movie, the kind you see for a quarter, all just make believe. Soon the projector would grind to a stop, the Martins would go away. Yet there stood the

Martins, twenty of them, their white no-pupil eyes glinting beneath strange helmets of steel.

The homesick girl stifled a scream. Behind the children, doors bumped shut.

Inside his chest, Pug's heart was drumming so hard he thought it would burst through. The other kids were nudging him forward. He forced himself to put on a brave front. "We—we brought the others, he quavered, "like we said we would!"

His words sounded small and ten year-old in the bright ancient room.

The girls huddled together nervously, and their dresses made a rustling, uneasy sound. The boys shuffled their feet uncertainly and glanced about with wonder in their eyes.

Then Martin drifted slowly forward and a thought leaped into the children's minds: Gifts . . . I promised . . . for you.

Martin removed his metal helmet and extended it to Pug.

Pug hesitated. He felt all tense and scared deep down inside. It wasn't the kind of fear that comes from knowing something is about to happen; it was an unreasoning fear that came instinctively, warning him he didn't know why.

Pug took the helmet as gingerly as if it were fire, but as he held it he couldn't help admiring it. It looked almost like a football helmet, only with wires running all around and two little antennas that wobbled on top. It fit Pug loosely, but his ears propped it up.

And now the other "Martins" were gliding forward, offering a metal headpiece to each child. The children accepted the gifts, timidly at first then eagerly when they saw the other kids wearing them.

AND then all of a sudden Pug had a funny feeling. He tried to move his arms, tried to take a step, but he couldn't. It was as if his body had turned to stone. A bubbling scream welled out of Pug's throat. The helmet started to vibrate; it droned, it seemed to tighten about his skull. His gaze grew blurry, as though he were seeing everything through waves of heat. The other kids were tea-

at their helmets, their fingers clawing helplessly against the steel. And Pug heard Otto's wail of terror—"I can't get it off—it won't let go."—then Pug's senses were gone, like lights switched out. A river of shadow was spilling into his brain, drowning every part of him that was awake. It was dark, so dark, and the river flowed faster and faster until he felt himself going down before the force of the torrent; then the waters closed above him with a rush and all was dark.

The droning stopped.

The Martians lay tumbled about the room like old rag dolls, carelessly dropped and forgotten.

Cords vibrated in Pug's throat. Words came with difficulty, as if Pug's voice were a tool that its user hadn't mastered yet.

"We . . . no longer shall need . . . these things."

Children's footsteps padded softly. Children's arms worked slowly, picking up the Martian hodies like so much cordwood, stacking them, building a pyre. When the last body had been carefully laid in place, the children stood there waiting.

Otto's fingers gripped a jar.

"Now?" asked Otto's voice.

"Now," Pug's voice said.

A pencil-thin beam came out of the jar and scribbled across the heaped-up bodies. Then it winked out.

Dust motes settled to the floor, spiralling a long slow time as they fell.

MISS WIPPLE was now positively boiling. When the last child had clambered up the ladder into the ship, her jaw began to function.

"For heaven's sake, where have you people been! Just look at the time! It's quarter to five! If you can't learn to be grown-ups and accept responsibility, we just aren't going to take any more rocket trips—not ever any more!"

Children's feet shuffled guiltily.

Children's eyes studied the floor.

"Very sorry . . . are we . . . Miss Wipple," Pug's voice said.

"Peter Stevens! Is that any way to put your sentences together? And after all I've talked about the subject at the predicate! You've been playing in the city, that's where you've been. I think we'd better have stay-after-school all the rest of this week—"

Suddenly Miss Wipple stopped short. She stared. The children were carrying strange-looking objects. Cones, blue globes, pyramids. Speckled vases with curious handles. Little green jars with coils wrapped around them. Shiny gray cylinders studded with knobs.

"Wh'where did you get these things?"

"In the sand," Pug's voice said. "We wanted . . . something . . . to take home."

Miss Wipple snatched up a vase of translucent amber, turned it over and over, with bulging eyes. How ancient it looked! How exquisitely made! "Good Lord," she murmured incredulously, "early Martian pottery!"

Oh, there was no doubt about it—the children had stumbled on a really important find! The archaeologists back on Earth were sure to be interested. Maybe the papers would print a big story all about it, complete with Miss Wipple's picture—

"Well, Peter, what did I tell you?" she beamed as the rocket leaped into space. "Didn't I say you'd dig up something to take back home? What beautiful things—why, I can't get over it! Won't your parents be surprised!"

Pug smiled.

"Oh, yes . . . Miss Wipple," Pug's voice purred over so softly. "They will be . . . surprised."

Earth was one small glitter in the diamond field of stars.

THE END



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